

*from the
Author.*

A
LETTER
TO THE
GOVERNORS
OF THE
SMALL-POX HOSPITAL.

LETTER



COMBINED

OF THE

AMERICAN HISTORICAL SOCIETY

NEW YORK

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A
LETTER
TO
HIS ROYAL HIGHNESS
THE DUKE OF YORK,
PRESIDENT;
THE
VICE-PRESIDENTS, TREASURER,
AND
GOVERNORS
OF THE
SMALL-POX HOSPITAL,
ON THE
PRESENT STATE
OF
THAT CHARITY.

An open foe may prove a curse,
But a pretended friend is worse.

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1808.



A
L E T T E R,

&c.

GENTLEMEN,

SALUS populi suprema lex. That individual opinions and interests should give way to the public good, are maxims not less sacred from the authority of time, than from the justness of their principles. The welfare and happiness of a nation depend more on measures of internal than of external policy; and a wise statesman is perfectly aware, that the true riches of a country consist as much in a numerous and well-regulated population, as in its manufactures and commerce.— To apply this to our subject: suppose a new disease, of unparalleled malignity, were to break out in a country, of so extremely contagious a nature, that wherever it appeared, no individual could hope to escape its fury; that, after a time, a mode were to be discovered of communicating it to persons, under proper restrictions, with comparative safety,

and without danger to others ; and an institution were formed for this purpose. Such an institution would be hailed as an offspring of the purest benevolence and philanthropy ; and would confer on its supporters the enviable title of friends to their country and mankind. Suppose still further, that, in the progress of time, the brilliant discovery of a preventive should be made, a discovery, if properly adopted, capable of exterminating this pestilence from the face of the earth ; and that the medical officers of this institution no longer communicated this disease to their patients with their pledged caution and circumspection, but sent them, like foxes with fire-brands at their tails, through every avenue of the metropolis, marking their progress with disease and death. Such an institution would be considered as a disgrace to the age, and a curse to the country.

Gentlemen, such was, and such is, your Small-pox Inoculation Hospital. Your responsibility as Governors of this Hospital, a responsibility voluntarily incurred, has induced me to address you on the present state of that charity. An anxious solicitude to mitigate the severity of so dreadful a distemper as the small-pox, and to relieve the distresses of those suffering under it, were, I am convinced, the only motives which actuated the projectors and supporters of this Hospital. But if

events have since occurred, which render this institution a public nuisance, the same philanthropy which at first prompted you to support it, will now urge you to oppose a practice, which can no longer be justified.

Grant me but an attentive and dispassionate perusal, and I feel confident you will coincide with me in the truth of these remarks. To place this subject in the clearest light possible, I shall first consider whether the practice of vaccination, if properly conducted, be capable of exterminating the small-pox. Secondly, if it be allowed to be capable, whether the Small-pox Hospital should be continued. And lastly, if inoculation for the small-pox be allowed, whether the Legislature ought not to impose certain restrictions.

Of all the medical questions which have been agitated, from the time of Hippocrates to the present day, not one has been so fully or so ably discussed as that of vaccination. In many parts of England, Ireland, and the Continent, tradition had long spoken of its prophylactic powers. It is, however, only within these few years that the brilliant experiment of communicating it by inoculation was made. When first divulged to the public, it was almost universally received with caution, and distrust. Being entirely a practical art, expe-

rience only could decide on its utility ; and time, that infallible appreciator of merit, which has deservedly consigned so many medical theories and theorists to oblivion, has served only to confirm the favourable opinion of its earliest supporters ; to remove the doubts of the sceptical, and to brand its opponents with infamy.

Twice has this subject been brought before the British Parliament ; twice has it received their sanction ; and twice has the author of it been rewarded. The first time, many gentlemen of the highest respectability and eminence in the medical profession, gave their testimony in favour of it ; and the Chairman of the Committee declared that “ the very kennels had been raked for evidence against it.” On this occasion the sum of ten thousand pounds was voted to Dr. Jenner. The last time, the most unexceptionable mode of inquiry possible was adopted ; and the Report of the Royal College of Physicians, on this subject, may be considered as the report of all the intelligent and respectable members of the medical profession in the United Kingdom ; since the College corresponded with the Colleges of Physicians and Surgeons of London, Dublin, and Edinburgh. On this occasion, twenty thousand pounds more were voted to Dr. Jenner.

In this Report, the College express their opinion, that vaccination, properly conducted, is capable of effecting the extermination of the small-pox ; and that the unfavourable statements laid before the public, were published by ignorant or designing men. Several of you, whom I am now addressing, are members of the Legislature. If you were not convinced of the truth of this Report of the College, why did you not oppose those grants of the public money ? The practice has now been introduced into every other country on the globe. Although it has had every where to contend against ignorance, prejudice, and indolence, yet its advocates are daily and hourly increasing ; and their testimony serves to confirm the favourable opinion of it, expressed in the Report.

It has also been introduced into the Army, by order of the Commander in Chief ; and into the Navy, by order of the Lords of the Admiralty.— This surely is not a time to tamper with the lives of our soldiers or our sailors ; and it would never have been introduced into the army and navy, from these high authorities, had not a full investigation of the subject impressed on their minds the strongest conviction of its beneficial effects.

But, what is still more to my present purpose, it was introduced into the Small-pox Hospital itself, by the late Dr. Woodville. If you did

not think favourably of it, why did you permit it to be practised there? And if, after seven or eight years experience, you do not continue to think favourably of it, why do you permit it to be continued there? Upon what grounds do you justify allowing your medical officers to vaccinate many hundreds annually, if you are not satisfied with its power of preventing the small-pox? If the cow-pock be a preventive of this disease, it is capable of effecting its extermination, by having recourse to the practice in infancy, and thus shielding the human race from the effects of that pestilence. Any further discussion on this point would be superfluous; as it is evident, from your own conduct, that you are convinced of the efficacy of vaccination.

A question now arises, why the inoculation for so infectious, loathsome, dangerous, and fatal a disease as the small-pox, should be continued, when we can have recourse to a mild and safe remedy, which equally secures the patient from future infection, and is incapable of communicating any contagion? Here, Gentlemen, I cannot avoid noticing a material deviation in the economy of your charity, since its first institution. When first established, it was divided into two departments; the one for preparing and inoculating patients, the other for receiving those who had taken the casual infection.

By removing patients to the Hospital as soon as the disease appeared, and by confining those who were inoculated until their recovery, infection was prevented from being disseminated. In the more affluent classes of life, a family, by living retiredly, might at any time be inoculated without much danger to their neighbours. This institution afforded the same advantage to the lower classes. The motives which led to its foundation were honourable ; the plan was useful.

At what time, and at the instigation of what evil and malignant genius, you first permitted the inoculation of out-patients, I know not ; but from that fatal hour, this metropolis has never known one single moment's respite from this horrible distemper. You will, perhaps, attempt to defend this practice by observing that, from the state of your funds you could admit only a very limited number for inoculation ; and that, as this disease is less dangerous when communicated by inoculation, than when taken casually, many of the out-patients have been saved, who would otherwise have fallen victims to it. All this I readily admit ; but were you not equally aware of the state of society, among the lower classes in London, where many families are crowded together in one house ; and where, if one child be variolated, infection will probably be communicated to the others, totally unprepared for it ; and many of them, perhaps, labouring under teeth-

ing, and other complaints incidental to infancy? Thus, when one out-patient is inoculated, a dozen may take the casual infection: add to this, the mischief of diffusing the contagion through the streets, by carrying the children to and from the Small-pox Hospital, twice or thrice a week during the disease. That shameful and abominable practice is the principal cause of the fatality of the small-pox in this city. Your Hospital affords a constant and inexhaustible source of contagion; it is the focus from which this poison is continually radiating to every part of the metropolis.

In a popular View of Vaccination, lately published by your physician Dr. Adams, he states, that out of 2500, variolated under the age of two years, in the last twelvemonth, only two died. Without meaning to impeach the veracity of Dr. Adams, I shall just observe, that he neither knows, nor can know, the total amount of deaths in those inoculated at the Small-pox Hospital. The children who are inoculated there are frequently brought from the distance of two or three miles. Can you be so totally ignorant of the nature of the small-pox as to believe, that 2500 children, under two years of age, can be carried that distance twice or thrice a week, in all seasons of the year, and in all the stages of the disease? Within that period, without seeking for them, I have heard of more than two cases of death from inoculation at

your institution. Suppose an infant, at this tender age, covered with the small-pox from head to foot, totally blind, his features so obliterated as not to be recognised by his nearest relations ; gasping for breath, and exhaling so dreadful a smell, that nothing but the irresistible ties of blood, or the strongest sense of moral duty, could induce any one to approach him. How is it possible, that a child in such a state, could be carried to the Hospital ? This is no imaginary picture. Some professional person in the neighbourhood is generally called in to witness the fatal catastrophe ; and to behold the remorse of the parents, for having sacrificed their child a victim to prejudice and to ignorance. The fate of these children not being known at the Hospital, they are registered as recovered. Within the above period, I also know of two cases of total blindness, from inoculation at your charity. In the annual Report of the Small-pox Hospital, I have never seen any account of the numbers in whom blindness and deformity have been occasioned, though out of 2500 they would form no inconsiderable share.

From the first establishment of the Asylum for the Indigent Blind, two thirds of the objects admitted into that charity have lost their sight from the small-pox. Were inoculation for that disease to cease, either the expenses of this institution would be reduced two thirds ; or, as blindness is

also occasioned by other causes, two thirds more could be admitted into it, who are now labouring under the complicated misery of blindness and indigence. This metropolis has long, and most deservedly, ranked before that of other countries, in the number and utility of its charitable institutions: it also presents two phenomena not to be met with in any other country—we have a society for the extermination of the small-pox, another for its propagation; a society for promoting blindness, and another for its reception.

Even while I am writing, I have been informed of two cases of death from inoculation at the Small-pox Hospital: one in Carnaby Street; the other in Warren Street, Fitzroy Square. Many other instances of death may easily be heard of, by those who have time and inclination to seek for them. It is not from the mutilated or defective statement of a public institution, or of any individual, that we can form a just estimate of deaths and casualties from this disease. As inoculation for the small-pox serves to propagate the natural infection, we must consider the average number of deaths, &c. which take place in those who receive it casually, and in those who are variolated in this metropolis, when the following statement will, perhaps, be found to be more correct than that of Dr. Adams. The Report of the College of Surgeons of London, on vaccination, is un-

doubtedly the most unfavourable which has yet been published on this subject. In this Report they state, that one hundred and sixty-four thousand, three hundred and eighty-one persons have been vaccinated, out of these

24, or 1 in 6849, had badly inflamed arms,
66, or 1 in 2477, have since had eruptions,
56, or 1 in 2917, have since had the small-pox.

Had the same number of persons caught the casual small-pox, on the fairest calculation

27,471 would have died.

72,413 would have been left blind, diseased, or maimed. Add to this the diffusion of the contagion.

Had the same number of persons been variolated in this metropolis, on the generally allowed average,

1643 would have died.

4929 would have been left blind, diseased, or maimed. Add here also the propagation of the disease.

Deaths and sufferings by the casual small-pox, in 164,381 persons :

99,884, or 1 in $1\frac{1}{2}$.

Deaths and sufferings by the inoculated small-pox in the same number :

6572, or 1 in 25.

Sufferings from vaccination in the same number :

146, or 1 in 1399.

If well-informed medical men admit the truth of the above statement, and I am convinced they will readily admit it, who, that is not dead to every sense of feeling and humanity, but must behold with the keenest regret, thousands of innocents in this country alone, annually doomed to a premature grave the helpless victims of the most perverse obstinacy, the blindest prejudice, the grossest ignorance, or the most sordid avarice? Were you fully aware of the extent of the mischief arising from the Small-pox Hospital, in continually supplying this deadly poison to every part of the metropolis, you would not, you could not afford the influence of your names, your rank, and your fortune, in support of so abominable an institution.

A plausible objection may possibly be urged to the total exclusion of variolation at this charity : “ That as it was originally founded for the express purpose of receiving and inoculating persons with this disease, the present Governors are the trustees, and not the proprietors, and consequently cannot totally forbid it.” This objection you have in a

great measure answered by introducing vaccination; for if you can appropriate part of the funds for that purpose, you can alienate the whole of them. Should any doubt arise on this subject, it may easily be obviated by a petition to Parliament, stating, that your charity, which was endowed for the benevolent purpose of mitigating the horrors of the small-pox, is now become a public nuisance, in consequence of a discovery being made, by which this disease may be exterminated; and entreating Parliament to allow you to devote your funds to this desirable end. A Parliament which has twice sanctioned the practice, and twice rewarded its author, would gladly embrace so favourable an opportunity of laying the axe to the root of the evil.

If, however, in opposition to the dictates of reason, justice, and humanity, you should be deterred from doing that which you ought to do, the public have, at least, a right to expect that you will no longer permit your medical officers to variolate out-patients, which is directly contrary to your charter, and wholly unjustifiable. Should you persist in this nefarious practice, the times, I trust, are not so degenerate, but a patriot may be found who will bring this subject seriously before the Legislature.

Some minds may, perhaps, revolt at the idea of legislative interference; give me leave, however, to ask these highly susceptible persons, what are

the quarantine laws? and in what consists the greater hardship of confining persons to their house, during the contagious stage of the small-pox, than confining them on board a ship, because the plague raged in the port from which they last sailed? If it be necessary to impose restrictions on persons under such circumstances, how much more are they required against a disease equally contagious, equally fatal, and constantly raging? When the plague prevails in a district, and destroys forty thousand people, it forms an important era in the history of the country. Here we have a disease which destroys as many thousands annually, and which we endeavour to support and propagate.

If a father or mother of a family choose to murder their own children, they have no right to murder their neighbours. If Government will not wholly forbid inoculation for the small-pox, they ought, at least, to put it under quarantine, by causing pest-houses to be erected in every parish, or compelling persons to be confined during inoculation under severe penalties. But John Bull will never submit to such an abridgment of his liberties. Let the Habeas Corpus Act be suspended; let a Minister, and all his relations, and friends, and dependants, be pensioned, and John Bull is a very docile animal; but the moment you prevent him from doing a thing which is absurd, and dangerous, and infamous; he imme-

diately bellows about his privileges, and insists upon going to hell his own way. What rights a man may possess in his savage state, I neither know nor care ; but, in a state of society, I am perfectly convinced he has no right to do any thing by which he injures his neighbours.

It is not long since the friends of humanity had the gratification of seeing the vile and abominable traffic in human blood totally abolished by a British Parliament ; and, I trust, ere long, they will have the additional gratification of beholding another British Parliament impose effectual checks on the propagation of the most destructive pestilence which the world has ever known.

“ *Salus populi suprema lex,*” is the ruling maxim of every good government ; to this maxim every consideration of convenience and interest must yield. If there are persons who are not restrained from injuring the community by any sense of moral or religious duty, it is the duty of the Legislature to interfere, and impose such restrictions as the occasion requires. It is as much the duty of Government to check the progress of disease, as to check the progress of robbery or treason ; and to protect the life of a subject, as well as his property.

Since the above went to press, I have been informed of the following instance of gross careless-

ness and impropriety in the conduct of the medical officers of your institution: Christian Stone, a servant, at No. 8, North Place, Gray's Inn Lane, attended at the Small-pox Hospital, Sept. 7, 1807, for the purpose of being vaccinated. She was much astonished and frightened, on finding that all persons who were desirous of being vaccinated, were shewn into a room, where many persons were admitted covered with the small-pox. Under these circumstances, she and several others were vaccinated. A week afterwards there was a vesicle on the inoculated part: from which one of the medical officers took matter. Nearly a week after this, she sickened, and broke out with the small-pox. Medical assistance at home was necessary: she has incurred a bill of two pounds, and her health is considerably impaired. This is charity with a vengeance—such a case as this certainly points out the necessity of a reform in your Hospital. Were you aware of the mischievous tendency of the practice pursued there, you would not, you could not, support such an abuse. If you will neither suppress inoculation for the small-pox, nor put it under proper restrictions, you ought at least to allow a separate apartment for the practice of vaccination, and not, under the specious promises of affording gratuitous inoculation to the poor, for a mild and safe complaint, expose them to the infection of a loathsome and fatal distemper.

THE END.

